

# Neglected Voices

## Speeches of African-American Representatives Addressing the Civil Rights Bill of 1875

*Representative Richard H. Cain, responding on February 4, 1875, to the argument that racial tolerance can not be legislated:*

Mr. CAIN. Mr. Speaker, in the discussion of this question of the civil-rights bill, it has become a question of interest to the country how the colored people feel on this question of the schools. I believe, Sir, that there is no part of this bill so important as the school clause. The education of the masses is to my mind of vital moment to the welfare, the peace, the safety, and the good government of the Republic. Every enlightened nation regards the development of the minds of the masses as of vital importance. How are you going to elevate this large mass of people? What is the means to be employed? Is it not the development of their minds, the molding and fashioning of their intellects, lifting them up from intellectual degradation by information, by instruction? I know of no other means so well adapted to the development of a nation as education.

Especially is this true in the Southern States of this Union, where the great cry against the colored people is their ignorance. Admit it, Sir, and it is a lamentable fact that the past laws and customs and habits and interests of the Southern States have prevented the colored people from attaining that education which otherwise they would gladly have attained. It was a part and parcel of the system of slavery to prevent education; for the moment you remove ignorance and develop the minds of those who are enslaved the less likely they are to remain contentedly in servitude. For this reason it was the policy of the South to keep in ignorance that part of the community that they controlled for their benefit as their slaves. Now that there is a change throughout the land, now that these millions formerly enslaved are free, it is essential to the welfare of the nation that they should be educated.

But the question arises in the discussion of this bill, how and where are you to do this work? As a republican, and for the sake of the welfare of the republican party, I am willing, if we cannot rally our friends to those higher conceptions entertained by Mr. Sumner--if we cannot bring up the republican party to that high standard with regard to the rights of man as seen by those who laid the foundation of this Government--then I am willing to agree to a compromise. If the school clause is objectionable to our friends, and they think they cannot sustain it, then let it be struck out entirely. We want no invidious discrimination in the laws of this country. Either give us that provision in its entirety or else leave it out altogether, and thus settle the question.

I believe the time is coming when the good sense of the people of this country, democrats as well as republicans, will recognize the necessity of educating the masses. The more the people are educated the better citizens they make. If you would have peace, if you would have quiet, if you would have good will, educate the masses of the community. Objection is made to the ignorance of the colored people, and the State of South Carolina is cited as an illustration of that ignorance operating in legislation. Why, Sir, if it be true that the legislators of South Carolina are to some extent ignorant, I answer that it is not their fault; the blame lies at somebody else's door.

Now, Sir, let the democracy, instead of reproaching us with our ignorance, establish schools; let them

guarantee to us school-houses in all the hamlets of the country; let them not burn them down, but build them up; let them not hang the teachers, but encourage and protect them; and then we shall have a great change in this country.

Sir, we must be educated. It is education that makes a people great. We are a part and parcel of this great nation, and are called upon to assume the responsibility of citizenship. We must have the appliances that make other people great. We must have school-houses and every appliance of education. If your objection is to guaranteeing to us in the civil-rights bill an equal enjoyment of school privileges, then I say surround us with all the other appliances; say nothing of the school-house if you choose, but enforce our rights under the law of the country, and we shall be enabled to exercise every other privilege in the community.

Mr. GUNCKEL. Let me ask the gentleman from South Carolina whether the colored people of the South want mixed schools.

Mr. CAIN. So far as my experience is concerned I do not believe they do. In South Carolina, where we control the whole school system, we have not a mixed school except the State college. In localities where whites are in the majority, they have two white trustees and one colored.

Mr. COBB, of Kansas. I desire to ask the gentleman what in his opinion will be the effect of the passage of the Senate civil-rights bill so far as regards the public-school system of the South.

Mr. CAIN. I believe that if the Congress of the United States will pass it and make it obligatory upon all the people to obey it and compel them to obey it, there will be no trouble at all.

Mr. KELLOGG. Would the gentleman prefer to retain the provision in regard to schools which I have moved to strike out in the House bill, or would he rather have that provision struck out according to my amendment.

Mr. CAIN. I agree to accept it.

Mr. KELLOGG. I offered it in the interest of your people as well as ours.

Mr. HYNES. Let me ask the gentleman a question, whether from his knowledge of the white and black people of the South he does not believe in every State controlled by the democratic party they would not abolish the school system rather than permit mixed schools? In other words, Mr. Speaker--

Mr. COX. Let me answer.

Mr. HYNES. I did not understand my friend to my left was from South Carolina. I ask my friend from South Carolina whether he does not believe that the prejudice against mixed schools in the South is not stronger in the minds of the white people there than their love for the public-school system?

Mr. CAIN. I do not know; I cannot judge of the democracy. [\(1\)](#)